

There is no evidence of a trend towards inexperience among British party leaders

By Democratic Audit

*Don't be fooled into thinking our party leaders are inexperienced, says **Stephen Barber**, who has recently published research addressing the question. In this post he argues they have plenty of exposure to high level executive politics before becoming MPs, although many have never had a job most of us would recognise.*

There is a popular perception that our current crop of political leaders are an



Party leaders tend to have considerable political experience. Credit: Scorpions and Centaurs (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

inexperienced elite; bright young things catapulted into power without exposure to working life. The theory goes that this is a recent phenomenon in comparison to the great figures who led parties in the past. But the truth of this perception is rather dependent on one's definition of experience.

As Professor Philip Cowley has recently [demonstrated](#), we have an incumbency with the least Parliamentary experience prior to leadership in comparable history. David Cameron and Ed Miliband took their parties' leaderships having served a single term each at Westminster while Nick Clegg, a former MEP, boasted just two years. The observation is all the more stark when comparison is made to these leaders' immediate predecessors. Michael Howard, Menzies Campbell and Gordon Brown all served long apprenticeships on the green benches of the Commons before assuming the leaderships of their respective parties.

Cameron, Clegg and Miliband also distinguish themselves from their predecessors in the amount of 'real life' work experience they bring to politics. While Howard, Campbell and Brown can count on non-political experience in the law and journalism in excess of 50 years between them, our three incumbents barely stake a claim to 11 years – and much less professionally distinguished at that.

More than this, David Cameron, Nick Clegg and Ed Miliband personify the claim that we live with a professional political class (see Peter Allen's [recent post](#) on this site for further discussion). After all, with their youthful looks and telegenic communication skills, each were Special Advisers before entering Parliament. Cameron worked for Chancellor Norman Lamont during the Exchange Rate Mechanism [crisis](#), Home Secretary Michael Howard during the [row](#) over prisons boss Derek Lewis and helped prepare John Major for [Prime Minister's Questions](#). Clegg worked at the European Commission, eventually in the private office of UK Commissioner and Vice President Leon Britton. Part of the opposition Treasury team, Miliband followed Chancellor Gordon Brown into office in 1997, becoming Chair of the influential Council of Economic Advisers.

So we can define experience in terms of time served at Westminster as an MP, professional experience in a recognised career and political experience now typically served in the executive offices of government. The 'professional politician' thesis tends to discard time spent as a Special Adviser and Cowley makes the case that it is political experience served in lieu of the back benches. But contrary to popular opinion, there is no evidence of a trend towards this 'careerlessness' in political leaders.

Many of our party leaders over the past 60 years entered Parliament with very little professional experience. When one looks at the figures since 1945, it can be seen that (excluding 'political experience'), the average leader could boast between 10 and 11 years professional work prior to their election to Westminster. And this includes some big entries including Hugh Gaitskell's 18 years and more than 20 years apiece for John Major, Paddy Ashdown and Clement Davies. At the other end of the spectrum, William Hague, Neil Kinnock and Charles Kennedy can count barely a decade between them.

But should we really be excluding so called 'political experience' gained at the top of government? Arguably, working closely with Cabinet Ministers and Prime Ministers is far better preparation for political leadership than 'real life' careers such as being a teacher, lawyer or postie. It could well be that when party selectors viewed the candidates during their respective party leadership elections, it was this high level executive experience which helped rather than hindered the campaigns of Cameron, Clegg and Miliband. More than this, if one includes pre-parliamentary political activity in the data, it is revealed that our three incumbents rank among the most experienced leaders since 1945. By this measure, Cameron can claim around 12 years pre-Westminster experience, Miliband 13 and Clegg 8 (though he was also an MEP).

Rather than confirming a trend, the election of Cameron, Clegg and Miliband could be seen, in part, as a reaction against the leaderships of their highly experienced predecessors who could be viewed as relative failures. Howard it should be remembered barely increased the Conservative's share of the vote in 2005, Campbell was lampooned over his age and Brown endured two years of plots against his premiership.

While future electoral fortunes will colour the next round of leadership elections, the more important question is whether the electorate will take exception to a professional class of politicians who are 'careerless' in the usual sense of the world of work. Will there come a time when a party leader will attract more votes by virtue of sharing the sort of life and professional experiences with those he or she seeks to represent?

For now, we perhaps have to adjust our conceptions of just what we mean by experience. But in accepting that our current crop do not lack exposure to 'work' prior to Westminster, there is a bigger question of whether the electorate will in time come to reject a professional political class.

Note: This post represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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